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TAGS: PGOV PTER SCUL YM
SUBJECT: GOOD WORKS AND GOD: TRACING SALAFISM'S GROWING
FOOTPRINT IN YEMEN

Classified By: Ambassador Stephen Seche for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. Salafism has spread rapidly in Yemen over the last two decades, fueled by wealthy Yemeni and Saudi benefactors, the judicious political use of Salafism by Yemen's leaders and an expansive network of charitable organizations. Increasingly, Yemen's Salafis are entering the public sphere, entrenching themselves in local communities through the provision of social services and using their voice in national politics. At the same time, the rapid growth of this hyper-conservative strain of Islam has created an environment ripe for extremism, which will continue to facilitate recruitment by terrorist organizations. END SUMMARY.

UNCHECKED GROWTH

¶2. (C) Salafis, who espouse a fundamentalist interpretation of Sunni Islam closely connected with Wahhabism, have a well-established national presence, with the strongest influence in Yemen's most populous cities - Taiz, followed by Sana'a, Aden, Ibb and Hudeidah. According to Majid al-Fahd, executive director of a local political NGO, Ibb is "completely dominated by Salafis, even at the government-controlled mosques." Several interlocutors said that the majority of new mosques in Yemen are Salafi, and up to 40 percent of Yemenis subscribe to Salafist ideology. In Sana'a's traditionally Zaydi Old City, Salafi mosques are "popping up all over," according to Hassan Zaid, secretary general of the Zaydi al-Haq party and a long-time resident of the Old City. "Most new mosques in Sana'a are Salafi, and their imams are definitely not government-controlled," Zaid told PolOff in February.

¶3. (C) The ROYG has encouraged Salafism in diverse areas of Yemen as a counter-weight to local forces that challenge its authority. In war-torn Saada governorate, it has tried to use the Salafis' strong Sunni Islam to limit the spread of Houthi-affiliated Zaydi (Shiite) ideology. The Dimaj Institute, widely recognized as one of the foremost Salafi institutions and a known recruiting center for foreign fighters, is located in the heart of Saada. Fahd told PolOff in March that, with the ROYG's blessing, the Salafis are "filling in the gaps between the Houthis and the government troops in Saada." He added that Saudi Arabia continues to "pour money" into Salafi mosques and organizations in Saada in an effort to influence politics along the border.

¶4. (C) In an April 19 meeting, General Mohamed Saleh Tammah, a leader of the Southern Movement, said that President Saleh has historically encouraged the growth of Salafism in the south to counter the socialists' influence. Salafism and the conservative interpretation of shari'a (Islamic law) it espouses are widespread in many of Yemen's tribal governorates. Dr. Ishaq al-Sabaai, who travels throughout

Shewba, Marib and Abyan as president of a Shebwa-based NGO, told PolOff in March that Salafis have planted the seeds of a "strange new culture" in Abyan. She said the Committee for the Prevention of Vice and the Promotion of Virtue is very active, and prevents women from leaving their homes, wearing fitted abayas or using cell phones.

TAKING A PAGE FROM THE HAMAS PLAYBOOK

¶5. (C) Powerful charitable groups, such as the Hikma Organization and al-Ihsan, have spread Salafist ideology and garnered popular support through the provision of social services. There is a thin) and sometimes non-existent) line between conservative Salafist ideology and violent extremism, and the two mix on the fringes of groups such as the Hikma Organization. Hikma members in Sana'a, Abyan and Aden have been accused of providing financial and logistical aid to foreign fighters in Iraq and Afghanistan, and according to local press reports, al-Qaeda affiliates use Hikma's charitable cover to operate with greater freedom.

¶6. (C) The Taiz-based Hikma Organization made its mark on Yemeni society by helping to resettle many of the 750,000 Yemenis deported from Saudi Arabia during the first Gulf War.

The group has branch offices in Sana'a, Aden, Hudeidah, Ibb and Taiz, and, according to Sana'a branch president Mohammed Saleh Aqlan, offices in every governorate, with plans to expand further into rural areas. Its brand-new, expansive headquarters in Sana'a are co-located on a compound with a large Salafi mosque, just off of one of Sana'a's busiest streets. The group's conservative religious ideology shapes all of its operations; the Sana'a branch selects imams to run

daily Quranic memorization programs for young students and deploys teams of imams to the city's poorest neighborhoods to identify families in need of support, Aqlan told PolOff in an April 14 meeting. At present, Hikma supports 500 families and 4,300 orphans in Sana'a alone, allowing them to "maintain their dignity in life," and likely winning their lifelong support in the process. The organization also builds much-needed community facilities, such as a new institute of pharmacology in Aden and a hospital in Hadramout.

¶7. (C) Historically, Islamic charities such as Hikma have received significant funding from the Gulf, but the U.S.'s post-September 11 terrorist-finance legislation has given many potential donors cause for hesitation. Saudis have continued to fund Salafist causes through informal channels, such as local imams interested in constructing Salafi mosques or Quranic schools. Yemen's Salafi charities have increasingly looked to local funding sources - including President Saleh - editor in chief of NewsYemen and al-Abwab magazine Nabil Sufi told PolOff in March. "We are open to any side that will fund us," Hikma's Aqlan said, adding that his budget comes mainly from large donors inside Yemen and Yemeni expatriates. He said the organization receives some money from Gulf institutions, but did not specify how much.

RELIGION AND POLITICS DO MIX

¶8. (C) While many Salafis eschew involvement in secular politics, elements of Yemen's Salafi movement have begun to take a more active role in the country's governance. "The Salafis are not one person. They have different personalities and priorities," Sufi told PolOff in March. "They'll work with the President if he opens himself to them." President Saleh met with key Salafi leaders before the 2006 presidential elections; he is reportedly close with Abdulhassan al-Maribi, one of the first Salafis to openly back his re-election campaign. The Salafis have been rewarded for their loyalty; President Saleh donated 50 million riyals (\$250,000 USD) to construct Hikma's Sana'a headquarters. After Hikma constructs community facilities, it donates them to the ROYG to own and operate, helping to fill the void in government-provided social services. Aqlan said the ROYG "is happy with what we are doing. And we

support the government in everything they do." Mohammed al-Hazmi, an imam and conservative MP from the opposition Islah party who has close Salafi ties, told PolOff on April 12 that he had no qualms about the movement's entry into the political sphere; rather, he described it as his "duty" to implement legislation backing the strictest forms of shari'a.

NewsYemen's Sufi predicted that Salafism will become an even greater force in Yemeni politics in the next two years.

¶9. (C) The danger in the pervasion of Salafist ideology in Yemen is the environment of extremist religious thought it nurtures. Although Salafism itself is not explicitly violent, its religious teachings paint a map of injustice against and invasion of the Muslim world that is easy for young minds to follow. According to Sufi, who himself studied briefly at a Salafi madrassa, "The Salafis themselves are not violent. But others may use their words, their fatwas for violence." It is no coincidence that the cities and neighborhoods with the most pervasive Salafist presence are the same locales that produce Yemen's violent extremists.

As Shawki al-Qadhi, an Islah MP, put it in a meeting with PolOff in March, "One can easily tinker with young minds."

COMMENT

¶10. (C) Salafism's rapid rise as a powerful force in Yemeni society bears close scrutiny. Its culture of fundamentalism and intolerance is a worrisome trend for moderates in Yemen and abroad. While correlation is not causation, the hyper-religious, conservative environment created by Yemen's Salafis has proven a fertile ground for recruitment of young Islamic extremists by groups such as al-Qaeda. Until this trend towards religious conservatism is contained or reversed, it will be difficult to counter Yemen's evolution as a major source of violent jihad. END COMMENT.

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